



Media and Body Image

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How can the media make me feel bad about my body?

Images of what the media believes are “ideal” women are everywhere—on TV, in movies, online, in magazines, in ads, and in video games. You may begin to believe that these images show what is normal. But the weights and body types of women you see in the media are not normal. Only about 5% of American women have the genetics to make it possible to look like these images. For most people, trying to look like these images can be unhealthy. It can cause **depression**, eating disorders, and low self-esteem.

It's hard not to compare how you look with these images. You may not like what you see in the mirror and look for ways to “fix” yourself. Diets, makeup, and clothes are sold to make women look more like the images they see in the media. Ads for these products may be designed to make you feel insecure. This is just a way to sell more products. It's not the truth of how a woman should look. Understanding how the media works is an important step in not letting these images control how you feel about yourself.

Why do TV characters who are supposed to be my age seem older or more mature than I am?

Most of the actresses on TV playing teenagers are in their 20s. By hiring older actors, studios don't have to worry about shorter working hours and on-set schooling for minors. The actresses you see playing girls your age on TV are older than you in real life. Very few of them look like real teenagers.

What should I do if people are making comments about my body that make me feel bad or uncomfortable?

Sometimes friends and parents think they are helping when they make certain comments, but they aren't. Often these comments can do more harm than good. You may need to change some things in your life to be healthy, but you don't need to listen to everyone's opinion about your body. Try responding to negative comments with these statements:

- “It hurts my feelings when you make comments about my food/weight/body.”
- “I know you mean well, but I'd appreciate it if you would keep those thoughts to yourself.”
- “How nice. Thanks for sharing that.”
- “How would you feel if I said something like that to you? Your comments about my food/weight/body are not helpful.”

What are the warning signs of an unhealthy body image?

You may have an unhealthy body image if you

- view yourself only in terms of how you look
- compare how you look with people on TV or in magazines
- use negative words to describe your body
- get depressed or sad about how you look
- constantly think about ways to improve your body or looks

What is a healthy body weight?

Body mass index (BMI) is a number calculated from height and weight that is used to determine whether a person is underweight, normal weight, overweight, or obese. When your BMI falls into the normal range, you are at a healthy body weight:

- BMI <18.5 is underweight.
- BMI 18.5–24.9 is normal weight.
- BMI 25.0–29.9 is overweight.
- BMI 30.0 and higher is obese.

To find out your BMI, use the online calculator at www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm.

What is a healthy amount of exercise?

Most teenagers should exercise for a total of 60 minutes on most days of the week. The activities you choose should be of moderate or vigorous intensity. Examples of moderate-intensity activities include brisk walking, dancing, bicycle riding, or hiking. Examples of vigorous-intensity activities include running, swimming, jumping rope, or soccer.

Exercise is good for your mind and your body. Staying active relieves stress, helps you sleep better, and can help ease depression and anxiety.

Should I go on a diet?

Many teenage girls who think they should go on a diet actually are a normal, healthy weight. But if your BMI is not in the healthy range, you may need to lose weight. To lose weight, you need to use up more calories than you take in. You can do this through regular physical activity combined with a program of healthy eating. You may have heard that you can lose weight more quickly with a “crash” diet, but these diets are not meant to be permanent. You are more likely to gain back the weight you lose if you go on a crash diet than if you make long-term lifestyle changes. Talk to your doctor about the best way to change your eating habits. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s web site “MyPlate” (www.choosemyplate.gov) also can help you plan a balanced diet.

How can I tell if my eating habits are unhealthy?

Teenagers who diet on their own may develop bad habits called disordered eating. These habits include

- fasting
- skipping meals
- extreme dieting
- binge eating
- making yourself vomit
- using **diuretics**, **laxatives**, or stimulants

Disordered eating occurs on a spectrum. When disordered eating becomes severe, it may be called an eating disorder.

What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder is a medical illness. If not treated, it can be life-threatening. People with eating disorders can be any weight. For example, it is possible to be a normal weight and still have an eating disorder.

People with eating disorders are very critical of their bodies. Some eating disorders include the following:

- **Anorexia nervosa**—A distorted body image leads a person to diet too much and sometimes exercise too much. People with anorexia usually are very underweight.
- **Bulimia**—A person who wants to lose weight or is afraid of gaining weight who binges on food, then forces vomiting or abuses laxatives. He or she also may exercise too much. People with bulimia usually are normal weight or slightly overweight.
- Binge eating—A person binges on food but does not vomit. People who binge eat usually are overweight or obese.

My body is changing as I get older. How do I know if these changes are normal?

During **puberty**, your body changes. You grow taller and your hips get wider. You may get acne or pimples. Your breasts and **vulva** change as well. These changes may cause you to wonder if your body looks “normal.” You may compare yourself with images you see online. You may even think about getting surgery to change parts of your body that you are not happy with. But it is important to remember that there is a wide range of normal when it comes to your body’s appearance. Things like breast and **labia** size vary from woman to woman. All of these differences are normal. If you are worried about these changes in your body, talk to your doctor.

What can I do to feel better about my body and be more confident?

The following may help you build confidence and maintain a healthy body image:

- Be aware of how the media affects the way you think about yourself. Understanding that the media’s standard of beauty is unrealistic will help you stop comparing yourself with something that is not real.
- Pay attention to how much media you consume every day. Take breaks from it.
- Understand that there is a wide range of normal body types.
- Eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly. Treating your body well will make you feel stronger and happier.
- Focus on achievement, not appearance. Find role models who do the same.
- Find friends who have similar values.

Resources

The following organizations and web sites have information that may be of interest to our readers. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) does not necessarily endorse the views expressed or the facts presented by these organizations or on these web sites. Further, ACOG does not endorse any commercial products that may be advertised or available from these organizations or on these web sites.

Center for Media Literacy

www.medialit.org

Center for Young Women’s Health

Boston Children’s Hospital

www.youngwomenshealth.org

Go Ask Alice!

Columbia University Health Education Program

www.goaskalice.columbia.edu

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

www.anad.org

National Eating Disorders Association

www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

NOW Foundation

Love Your Body

<http://now.org/now-foundation/love-your-body/>

The Representation Project

<http://therepresentationproject.org>

USDA ChooseMyPlate.gov

www.choosemyplate.gov

Women’s Media Center

Media Programs for Girls

www.womensmediacenter.com/pages/media-programs-for-girls

Glossary

Anorexia Nervosa: An eating disorder in which distorted body image leads a person to diet excessively.

Body Mass Index (BMI): A number calculated from height and weight that is used to determine whether a person is underweight, normal weight, overweight, or obese.

Bulimia: An eating disorder in which a person binges on food and then forces vomiting or abuses laxatives.

Depression: Feelings of sadness for periods of at least 2 weeks.

Diuretics: Drugs given to increase the production of urine.

Labia: Folds of skin on either side of the opening of the vagina.

Laxatives: Products that are used to empty the bowels.

Puberty: The stage of life when the reproductive organs start to function and other sex features develop.

Vulva: The external female genital area.

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

TFAQ002: Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to the institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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